



On the Wagner Trail - Interview to Anthony Negus

by Sophie Rashbrook.

For 20 years, Anthony Negus has been Music Director at Longborough Festival Opera in the UK. An established Wagnerian, he is conducting Longborough's brand new production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (from June 2019 to June 2023).

Wagner is a full-time occupation for Rheingold conductor Anthony Negus. As a case in point, when I meet him in central London, he has just coached a singer preparing a role in *Tristan und Isolde*, and is about to attend a Wagner Society talk on *Parsifal*, having recently returned from conducting a production of *Der fliegende Holländer* in Melbourne. Anthony first heard Wagner's music as a child, in a 1960 performance of *Das Rheingold* at the Royal Opera House, but rather than the clichéd accounts of mind-blowing revelation, he had a rather more grounded response, and a sensation of encountering something that was already a part of him. "It was familiar," he recounts. "It felt like coming home. Yet I knew it was going to be a huge journey for me." That journey would turn out to be a lifelong voyage, and one which accelerated at an astonishing rate, even by the standards of the most ardent Wagner fanatics. "In 1961 I got access to the orchestra pit at Bayreuth, where I experienced *The Ring* conducted by Rudolf Kempe, who I met that year, and *Tristan* conducted by Karl Boehm. I just fell into the heart of it."

For every Wagner lover, a trip to Bayreuth, the composer's purpose-built theatre and final home, is something of a pilgrimage, but one doesn't gain access to the epicentre of the Wagner universe as a teenager by accident. "I was spending hours and hours playing Wagner on the piano: I used to play the *Parsifal* on Good Friday every year - I would imagine that I was the orchestra," reminisces Anthony. Yet despite the quasi-religious adulation that the composer and his music can attract from some quarters, Anthony is wary of falling into this trap: "I definitely cut through the mystique: when you're conducting this music, you have to get down to the nitty-gritty. And actually, Wagner's relationship with his orchestral musicians was extremely pragmatic: he nurtured his players, and that's an approach that I believe in, too."

Another hallmark of Anthony's conducting style is a commitment to providing space for the music: "It needs rhythmic lift; it needs to breathe. You wouldn't conduct Beethoven or Mozart without the rhythm being incisive, and Wagner was more influenced by Beethoven than anyone else." He also advocates the importance of silence during performances: "There's something at work when you allow silence to speak, and there are different types of silence that you create as a conductor, and which the audience can feel." Conducting the *Ring* is a balancing act: "You've got to do the job. You have to be realistic, so that the musicians feel safe: that is the foundation from which inspiration can flow."

Further inspiration can be found in decoding Wagner's Leitmotifs; the recurrent melodic fragments that make up the musical fabric of the entire *Ring*, and which are frequently associated with particular themes, characters or objects in the saga. Citing as an example Rheinmaiden Woglinde's line: 'Nur wer der Minne Macht versagt' (Only the one who renounces love...') from the opening scene of *Das Rheingold*, Anthony says: "The first time [the Leitmotifs] appear, especially with text, is of great significance and



importance for later development.” However, he is wary of too simplistic an interpretation of these musical ‘cells’: “The labels are useful provided that one accepts that they don't tell the whole story.”

The complexity of Wagner’s story is just one aspect of the Ring Cycle which could be intimidating to an outsider. Embarking on the task as a conductor, one is not necessarily helped by the huge array of scholarly writing on the subject. “It is daunting,” he says. “There is a lot I should have read but haven’t, and when I have read certain books, the work of studying the music usually takes over.” The sea of recordings could prove equally stifling, although Anthony is delighted to be forging his own path as an artist, after many enriching years working as an Assistant Conductor and Répétiteur on multiple Wagner productions: “I feel that my voice is just emerging. It was an LP entitled Toscanini Conducts Wagner that really got me going in the first place – and I still look to him, and pay tribute to all the influences that got me here. But it was the telephone call from Longborough that really opened things up for me.”

That fateful phone call, made in 2000 by stage director Alan Privett, marked the start of a long-standing relationship between Anthony and the Festival. From its beginnings with a reduced orchestration, 9-hour Ring Cycle spread over 4 nights (as opposed to the full-length 15 hours), the festival has evolved into an operatic institution with considerable impact and an international profile. Anthony has been thrilled to be part of that journey, and relishes the chance to revisit the Ring Cycle with every Longborough staging, although he will take a measured approach: “You have to go step by step with this music, and allow it work itself through.”

Yet despite his insistence on a pragmatic approach to conducting Wagner, Anthony’s wonderment at the composer’s use of tonality only increases as the years go by: “His command of harmony is awe-inspiring, and his rhythmic structure creates magic.” There is also magic in the joy of true artistic collaboration: “I’m very receptive to lighting design,” Anthony says. “If I feel it’s right, it helps me to colour the music, and I’ve been very lucky that I’ve worked with directors who care about the music.”

Taking breaks between what Anthony describes as “Intense bouts of Wagnerian activity” throughout his career has invariably revealed unexpected delights: “Any job I’m given sets me on the trail. The music is always there, in the back of my mind, but I’m resting at the moment, ready to embark on the journey. What I enjoy most is coming back to the music, opening the score and saying, ‘Oh my goodness! It’s got to be performed like this, and I’ve only just seen that.’” The next four years at Longborough look set to be full of discoveries for conductor, performers, and audience alike.

Longborough Festival Opera begins its new Ring cycle on 5 June 2019 with a performance of Das Rheingold. Visit <https://lfo.org.uk/> for more information.